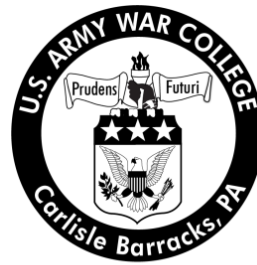


Unconscious Provocations – America and Japan before 1941

by

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United States Army War College
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UNCONSCIOUS PROVOCATIONS – AMERICA AND JAPAN BEFORE 1941

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Rising powers, such as China, present a challenge to those powerful nations that are responsible for maintaining the international system of security, law, and commerce. Those rising powers seek a greater influence and authority commensurate with their new found power. Historically, this confrontation between new and old has led to catastrophic wars. Beginning in 1894 and ending in 1945, a rising Japanese empire challenged European and American nations in the Pacific and China and reaped a disastrous war that destroyed their country. This war between Japan and the United States was not inevitable. A series of misunderstandings, misjudgments, brinksmanship, and misguided policy led the two countries to war. Some of these misguided policies taken in the early twentieth century are being employed again by the United States and by China today. As with Japan, war is not inevitable, but a sophisticated foreign policy approach toward China is America's most prudent course.

UNCONSCIOUS PROVOCATIONS – AMERICA AND JAPAN BEFORE 1941

It is not he who gives abuse that affronts, but the view that we take of it as insulting; so that when one provokes you it is your own opinion which is provoking¹

—Epictetus

To paraphrase the Greek Philosopher, Epictetus, an act is provocative if it is perceived to be so by the recipient. History is replete with examples of failed attempts at deterrence and diplomacy because the object of the deterrence strategy believed that no good options were available, and thus was provoked into military action in order to defend its interests, its honor, or out of fear of annihilation. Nation-states can fundamentally misunderstand the intentions and motivations of another and so are more likely to blunder into this state of unintentional or unconscious provocation. Japan and the United States unconsciously provoked one another in 1941 leading to untold suffering and death for millions of people during World War II. The leaders of China and the United States are now posturing themselves for misunderstandings that can ultimately lead to conflict. A complex and thoughtful foreign policy in both countries is the best path forward. As George Santayana stated, “those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it”.² Policy makers in Beijing and Washington would be wise to study the Japanese-American experience because some of the mistakes made then appear to be happening again between China and the United States.

In a speech at the Pentagon on January 5th 2012, President Barak Obama in outlining America’s new defense strategy stated, “as I made clear in Australia, we will be strengthening our presence in the Asia Pacific...”³ Flanked by the Joint Chiefs and the Secretary of Defense, the President made plain that the United States views its

greatest strategic competition, and perhaps its greatest threat, from the People's Republic of China. China's meteoric rise over the last ten years is well documented. Some experts estimate that China's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) will surpass the United States by as early as the year 2020.⁴ Along with its new found economic power, all of China's elements of national power, especially its military power, are growing in capability. China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) is engaging in a large military buildup relative to its recent history. In 2007, overall Chinese military budgets increased 17.8 percent and have remained at that historically high level since that time.⁵ A symbol of that increase is the construction of the first Chinese aircraft carrier that is now conducting sea trials.

These massive increases in defense spending, although still small by American standards, and a few belligerent acts in the South China Sea show that China is eminently aware of its new strength in the Asia-Pacific region and in the world.⁶ How the United States and China manage their relationship in the future is a matter of significant importance to both countries. The potential for mutual cooperation and the benefits of a partnership between China and the United States would seem obvious; unfortunately, both countries appear to be traveling a path more likely to see conflict.

Many other rising powers have had a history of managing their new influence and capability in clumsy and occasionally catastrophic ways, such as France under Napoleon and Germany before World War I. The existing power status quo also has an equally poor record of effectively incorporating these new rising powers into the international system as a respected equal or partner, preferring to maintain the current system and balance of power – by force if necessary - as the British would attempt to do

between the World Wars. The United States and China, representing the status quo and the rising power, are already posturing themselves to repeat some of the mistakes of the past, many of which lead to war.

An analysis of the rise of Japan in the first half of the 20th century and its relationship with Western nations and the United States in particular, provides an instructive example of how each country misunderstood and therefore inadvertently provoked the other. Events and policies that led to war with Japan in 1941 began forty years earlier and gradually compounded over time. A long history of mistrust, xenophobia, failed diplomacy and deterrence, followed by attempts to contain Japan exacerbated Japanese isolation, nationalism, and desperation, and fueled an escalating action and reaction cycle that culminated in a disastrous war. Japan's resultant expansionist policy and strong nationalistic ideology begat the war that not only destroyed the Japanese government and military, the lives of millions of people throughout Southeast Asia, the infrastructure of several nations, but also led to the advent of nuclear weapons and a complete change in the international system of power. This outcome was not preordained. Opportunities were missed in Japan and in the United States to avoid the War in the Pacific.

Sources of Mistrust – 1882 to 1913

Routine contact between Japan, China, the United States, and European nations grew rapidly out of the European colonial experience, the migration of laborers from China and Japan to the United States, and America's territorial gains in the Pacific from the Spanish-American War in 1899.⁷ China endured the exploitation of European and Japanese colonialism throughout the 19th Century resulting in internal political chaos until well after World War II.⁸ Japan, conversely, unified and strengthened its nation

under an imperial system of government after the Meiji Restoration in 1868.⁹ The new emperor focused on modernization and the development of governmental, military, and economic systems.¹⁰ The unified and now modern Japan found itself alone among Asian countries as a viable alternative to European exploitation in the region and began to develop an appetite for empire that was regionally focused in the model of the British Empire. With Japan's stunning and unexpected victories over the Chinese in 1895 and over the Russians in 1904, Japan suddenly held new territorial conquests in Taiwan, Korea, China, and the southern portion of Sakhalin.¹¹

The United States was also expanding during this time. The Spanish-American War left the United States with overseas possessions in the Pacific for the first time. The new American territories of the Philippines and Guam, so close to the nascent Japanese Empire, immediately became a source of insecurity for Japan and a means for influence in the region for the United States.

The Open Door policy in China refers to an agreement in 1898, put forward by the United States to maintain access to China for all nations with interests there and to maintain China's territorial boundaries.¹² The agreement is rooted in Japan's defeat of Russia in 1904 in northern Manchuria, which sent a collective shudder throughout Europe and America, whose leaders felt that if Japan could defeat Russia so easily, then their own interests in China were threatened by Japan.¹³ Japan's very first experience as a first rate power on the world stage was to be "managed" by European powers and the United States in order to contain its own imperial ambitions. Japan immediately felt the unusual combination of power in its military conquest and insecurity at the international community's reaction to that victory. While the Open Door policy was

never fully enforced, the insecure feeling that it inspired in the Japanese psyche would influence its foreign policy for the next forty years.¹⁴

Racial attitudes of the 19th and early 20th Century also contributed to a general animosity between Japan and their European and American counterparts. The initial and greatest numbers of immigrants to California in the 19th Century were from China. These laborers immigrated to participate in the large railroad projects in the United States, but from the outset were considered second-class citizens at the time and became the target of laws to restrict their rights. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 was the first of such laws by the United States that severely limited the influx of Chinese labor due to concerns by Californians over their growing numbers.¹⁵ An unforeseen consequence of the act was a large increase in the number of Japanese immigrants to California to perform the same work previously done by Chinese workers. The increase in Asian populations to California led to a reaction among white residents that Asians were attempting to take over the American West. The popular press fed on these attitudes so that by 1900, fear among whites became organized opposition to Asian integration into American life. By 1905, San Francisco's Asiatic Exclusion League succeeded in banning Chinese and Japanese children from public schools. The rapid rise in anti-Asian sentiment in California and the rest of the United States was further increased by Yellow Journalists such as William Randolph Hurst who coined the term "Yellow Peril" and wrote regularly about a pending conflict between Japan and the United States.¹⁶ In 1907, San Francisco experienced riots in protest of Japanese immigrants. When the Japanese ambassador in Washington rightly complained about the treatment of Japanese immigrants, President Theodore Roosevelt's response was

to direct the Army and Navy to beginning war planning and to order the United States Fleet from the Atlantic to the Pacific as a defensive measure.¹⁷ In 1908 the President ordered the famous Great White Fleet to sail around the world, with a port call in Tokyo. One of the intended purposes of the voyage was to show Japan how quickly the United States could move into the Pacific region. Naturally, the Japanese saw all of these moves by the United States as provocative and caused journalists there to begin writing about a “White Peril” in the United States.¹⁸

Strong anti-Japanese sentiments continued in the United States leading up to World War I. In 1913, Californians passed the Webb-Heney Alien Land Act which denied land ownership by people of Japanese descent. Japan’s government naturally protested the law and in response the United States Navy proposed to President Wilson a Naval Expedition to the Philippines as a demonstration of force. The president denied the request but the Navy’s position was leaked to the press, which led to further Japanese irritation at the United States. Yet another round of Japanese war scares ensued in America, accompanied by a military alert in the Philippines and rumors in the press of Japanese in Mexico plotting against the United States.¹⁹

By the beginning of World War I, Japan and the United States deeply mistrusted each other. Xenophobia perpetuated by irresponsible journalism and openly hostile government policy meant that the populations and the governments in each country were suspicious of the other’s intentions. President Theodore Roosevelt, a believer in the eminent rise of global power for the United States used the press and public sentiment against Japan to build an even larger Navy.²⁰ That naval buildup and the forward presence of American soldiers, sailors, and Marines in The Philippines helped

create a sense of encirclement and oppression from the United States in the minds of Japanese and contributed to the growth of nationalism that enabled Japanese militarists to come to power. The emotional preparation for confrontation and conflict was largely complete by the time World War I began. Evidence of the poor state of affairs between the United States and Japan is Secretary War Henry Stimson's statement in 1913, "The Oriental mind is one that must be met with firmness".²¹ Clearly, a vast gulf in understanding existed between the two nations.

World War I and the Washington Conference – 1914 to 1922

After the Russo-Japanese War of 1905, Great Britain and Japan entered into an unlikely military alliance. Both entered the treaty out of self-interest; Britain to guarantee Japan's security in the hope that it would curb Japan's expansionist tendencies, Japan to buy time until its Navy and Army were sufficiently modern and strong enough to secure its own empire. Because of these opposing goals, the alliance was difficult from the outset. Once the war in Europe began in 1914, Japan entered the conflict with Britain and the allies. Japan, however saw the European powers' distraction as an opportunity to consolidate and strengthen its position in China and elsewhere in the region.²² Japan soon began to make demands that stressed the partnership and set the stage for the end of the feeble alliance. Assuming a quid pro quo for assisting Britain, Japan demanded the German holdings in the Marshall Islands, Carolines, Marianas, Palau Islands and Krautschau on the Chinese Mainland. While in the end Japan achieved these territories through the treaty of Versailles, the demand of them early in the war at a time when France, with British assistance, was fighting for its very existence, seemed presumptuous. Britain began to see Japan as an opportunist rather than an ally.

In 1915, Japan approached China with what became known as the “Twenty-one Demands”. This treaty repudiated the Open-Door policy with China and solidified Japan’s possessions on the mainland after the war.²³ Goodwill between the United States, the United Kingdom, and Japan declined rapidly afterward. At the end of World War I, the Anglo-Japanese alliance was an alliance of convenience that no longer served a purpose for each country. The Japanese felt that it was time for an Asian power, Japan, to control Asia and the Pacific and that Britain, the ultimate expression of 19th Century colonialism, was an anachronism.

By 1920, mutual trust between the West and Japan was at an all time low. Japan’s foreign policy intentions were never clear to outsiders and the West assumed with great concern that Japan was pursuing an empire of its own, or at the very least a regional hegemony that threatened European and American interests, Chinese independence, and the Open Door Policy, and therefore those intentions needed to be controlled or deterred.²⁴

Nervous over Japan’s designs in the Pacific region, and of the financial implications of a naval arms race, United States President Harding held the first arms limitation conference in the United States that aimed to end that pending naval arms race between the United Kingdom, the United States, and Japan.²⁵ (The British and American friendship, so central in World War II and afterward, was not yet established in 1920, and so Britain and America remained rivals.) The Washington Conference hosted nine of the victorious powers from World War I: The United States, Japan, China, France, the United Kingdom, Italy, Belgium, the Netherlands and Portugal. The Soviets were excluded.²⁶

Considered a great achievement at the time, the three treaties from the conference detailed three major agreements: The first agreement was to maintain the status quo regarding foreign possessions in Indochina, China, and throughout the Western Pacific. The second treaty established limits on naval building to end the arms race; the effect was that Britain, America, and Japan could achieve a rough parity regarding naval power. The final agreement known as the Nine Power Treaty reaffirmed Chinese independence and free access to China's markets – a reaffirmation of the Open Door Policy, thus effectively ending Japan's "Twenty-One Demands" treaties with the Chinese.²⁷ All three of these agreements, intended to keep peace and trade open, also were aimed at limiting Japanese ambitions in China and other holdings throughout the area. Japan was also aware that although it maintained a naval equality with the United States and Britain, it felt surrounded by nations that had common interests against its own. In short, the Japanese military was aware that against a coalition of the United States and Britain, the Navy would be inadequately armed for defense. The treaty soon bred resentment in Japan that affected its political life over the next 15 years. The treaties that were designed to end the arms race and to deter Japan from aggression, effectively had the opposite result: it served to rally its people and politicians, isolate the country from the rest of the world, to arm itself, and prepare it to make its own empire in Asia to secure its independence from the West.²⁸

Internal Japanese Politics – Road to Militarism

At the end of the First World War, an historical moment when Japan should have felt pride in the accomplishments of the previous 30 years, the sense that Western powers, the United States in particular, not only refused to accept Japan's growing influence and power, but actively worked to circumvent Japan's "inevitable" rise led to

both a great insecurity and resentment in Japan that fueled nationalism and the look for “a new way” politically and economically. A Japanese Diet member stated in 1920, “America has only herself to blame if sober Japanese are beginning to suspect her of designs upon their country and its most cherished interests....Japan would assume that professions of idealism coming from Washington were actually a shield to conceal the normal nationalistic ambitions of a growing country. America appears to think she is divinely appointed to rule the world with a big stick!”²⁹ In fact, the Japanese believed firmly that The Washington System served only the old international system at Japan’s expense.

During the period following World War I, Japan was involved in an internal political struggle to determine its future foreign policy and even its method of government. The central government was weak, not the monolithic imperial power as the country appeared to outsiders.³⁰ The government was controlled by groups, committees, cabals, and various power brokers that ruled by conference and consensus when possible. Japan’s fifteen prime minister changes between 1921 and 1937 are a prime example of the instability during this period.³¹ Debate and intrigue over the shape of Japanese foreign relations, the size, administration, and method of acquisition for its growing empire were a continuous fixture of political dialogue. A few ministers argued for peace and cooperation with the West because Japan was so dependent on them; the United States provided 90 percent of Japan’s oil and most of its scrap metal. By 1920, America purchased 40 percent of all Japan’s exports.³² Even so, the general sense among the Japanese people was that the “outside world” was against them. Unlike the Nazis in Germany, Japanese fascism evolved over many years. The

domestic divisions in the 1920s, followed by the world-wide depression in the early 1930s provided a feeling that the old international system had to change to suit Japan's national objectives. The Washington Conference System, the worldwide depression, the need to secure its own resources independent of foreign nations, and the sense of nationalism fueled a gradual shift in outlook among the Japanese people.³³ In this environment, what emerged in Japan by 1937 was a militarized government and a population that felt that Japan's time had come.

Action and Reaction Cycle – Deterrence Failed 1931-1941

By 1931, Japan's holdings in China were considerable. The Japanese Army administering these holdings, known as the Kwangtung Army (or Kantogun), was the most prestigious and independent command in the Imperial Japanese Army. During the turbulent time of political instability in Japan, the Kwangtung Army became accustomed to making policy in China independent from the central government in Tokyo.³⁴ The Army, a strong political power in Japan by 1931, advocated a strong expansionist policy for the empire.³⁵ The independent nature of the Kantogun and its militaristic ideology meant that the situation in China was ripe for exploitation. The Mukden incident, a secret plot by the Kwangtung Army commander to facilitate a casus belli for a full Japanese Invasion of Manchuria, set in motion a series of fateful decisions that ultimately led to a massive Japanese Army occupation in China and ultimately war with the United States.³⁶ The 1931 Mukden incident plot in which an attack on facilities in China was blamed on the Chinese, did not have approval of the central government but likely had supporters within the Army and with others in Tokyo.³⁷ In China the plot was uncovered for what it was and the news dispersed around the world, but in Japan, war

fever grew rapidly and the subsequent invasion of Manchuria was accompanied with widespread patriotic public support among the Japanese people.³⁸

Japan's decision to invest China and to create the puppet state of Manchukuo, and finally the wider war with China that began in full in 1937 would be Japan's fateful decision. The United States was Japan's primary source of fuel and steel for its Army and Japan had risked the availability of those resources by going to war in China. Once into China, the investment of Japanese lives and national prestige, meant Japan could not easily withdraw from the mainland without risking a major blow to its empire, and risking the downfall of the entire government. Paradoxically, Japan also could not continue the war without resources from the United States. It is this conundrum that drove decisions leading to war with the United States.

In Washington, however, the Japanese position, that of being trapped between two bad choices clearly was not considered or understood. The establishment of the Japanese puppet state in China, Manchukuo, the massive invasion in 1937 and the subsequent Nanking Massacre, prompted the United States, France, and the United Kingdom to support China with aid from Indochina.³⁹ Japan's response was to invade Indochina to cut the line of communication there. In addition to supporting China, the United States also cut exports of aviation fuel and machine parts to Japan, a decision that Japan felt was hostile.⁴⁰ In the summer of 1941, Roosevelt ordered the Pacific Fleet from its home port in San Diego to Hawaii and reinforced the Philippines.⁴¹ America's attempts to halt Japan's quest for empire and economic independence through a regional hegemony through deterrence was met with Japanese protests that America was provoking a wider war in the Pacific.⁴²

Of course, the United States possessed one last significant lever to influence Japan's policy in China – that of oil exports upon which Japan was dependent for both its military adventures and its civilian economy. How to use this leverage was the source of debate inside Roosevelt's cabinet. The aggressive minded, Secretary of War Stimson among them, felt that a complete embargo would force Japan to abandon China.⁴³ More believed, the President included, that this would be such a great provocation that the likelihood of war with Japan would be very great.⁴⁴ The underlying assumption regarding the debate of an embargo held a fatal assumption; that Japan had no hope of defeating the United States in a war and therefore would never attack American interests.

It appears that only feeble attempts to understand Japan's motivation were made in Washington. Secretary of War Henry Stimson stated "The Japanese are notorious bluffers," and that the United States "would simply let our actions speak for us."⁴⁵ In July, the President asked for a flexible mechanism in which he could quickly control the flow of oil to Japan in attempt to deter an attack into the Dutch East Indies by the Japanese.⁴⁶ His mechanism backfired and in a series of events less overt than the Mukden incident, although similar in that decisions made by lower level authorities that could not be controlled or were unknown by the President, a complete oil embargo was inadvertently imposed on Japan. Dean Acheson, the assistant secretary of state and in the "hawk" camp in the administration, was charged with setting up the control measures over oil exports. These control measures required the Japanese to apply for permission to buy oil, when the Japanese made application, the State Department simply sat on the requests, thus creating a de facto embargo.⁴⁷ Acheson, in his

memoirs, wrote that he was certain at the time that Japanese would never attack the United States and so his delay in approving the oil applications seemed appropriate.⁴⁸ It remains unclear when the president finally learned of Acheson's embargo, but as late as August 27th, one month later, the President informed the Japanese ambassador that Japan was allowed to import oil.⁴⁹ By that time, it was too late to stop the inertia in Japan for a desperate attack on the United States that had little hope of success.

The United States and China Today – Relearning Lessons

Today in China, a debate regarding the future of the country's role throughout the world is taking place. As with Japan eighty years ago, nationalists, isolationists, realists, and a few globalists argue for a contemporary foreign policy commensurate with its massive economic power.⁵⁰ China is now at a precipice, but its true intentions are unformed, uncertain, and thoroughly opaque to outsiders. Because China is itself uncertain about its position in the world, the United States is driven to a policy that hedges against that uncertainty.

In China now, there exists a sense of impending greatness and cultural exceptionalism.⁵¹ The Chinese people have a long history of being controlled by external forces inside the country that created a cultural self-consciousness and sense of inferiority that China is only now emerging from. The inevitable feeling that China's time has come is accelerating the internal debate about its own future.⁵² China is now, as Japan was one hundred years ago, unprepared for its new international status as an economic superpower.

Xenophobia in China is alive and nationalism is rising. Some conservative, usually older, Chinese are worried about the loss of Chinese homogeneity in a world with much greater openness and globalism.⁵³ They view the world as a struggle with

America for the dominance of a new world order in which the Chinese will make the rules as the United States has since World War II.⁵⁴ But the most dominant foreign policy school of thought in China is a group of political realists who believe in a strong nation-state that is resilient and can withstand the anarchy of the international system.⁵⁵ Some realists believe that after so many years of other nations imposing their will, China's ascendancy, prestige, and power to shape international events is now, specifically over issues in the Western Pacific and Taiwan. This group argues that China should act in a classically Clausewitzian manner, out of its own self-interest, and not from lofty Marxist ideals.⁵⁶

As China struggles internally for its grand strategy, relations with other nations are degrading. In January 2010, China suspended military exchanges with the United States in protest over the sale of military equipment to Taiwan by the United States.⁵⁷ The on-again, off-again status of military cooperation between the United States and China has been detrimental to growing a stable Pacific maritime environment. Before 2010, the Theater Security Cooperation (TSC) engagement plan for United States Pacific Command (USPACOM) provided for the engagement of senior military officers from USPACOM with their counterparts in the People's Liberation Army – Navy of China. This policy provided valuable insights into Chinese naval strategic thinking and positive relationships at the strategic level that the United States was able to leverage in at least one crisis. In 2001, a Chinese fighter aircraft and a U.S. Navy P-3 Orion aircraft collided in mid-air, forcing the American plane to land in China and resulted in the loss of the Chinese aircraft and pilot.⁵⁸ The USPACOM commander, Admiral Dennis Blair, used his personal relationship with the Chinese Chief of Defense to help resolve the

conflict.⁵⁹ Although the success of Admiral Blair's efforts is noteworthy, a more thorough understanding of operational methods and concepts at lower levels of command in both the Chinese and U.S. military may have averted the collision of the aircraft altogether.

Over the past year, the Chinese government has had several maritime confrontations involving Vietnam, Japan, and the Philippines.⁶⁰ These confrontations stem from historic border disputes, conflict over rights to natural resources, and Chinese aggressive statements about control of the South China Sea. Because of these tense situations and China's generally poor crisis management during these conflicts, the potential for air and sea military confrontation is increasing. The combination of Chinese inexperience as a naval power and greater Chinese presence in the Pacific and Indian Oceans could result in larger and more frequent accidental provocations between warships and aircraft in the region similar to the P-3 incident of 2001.

These events suggest that the United States must prudently respond to China with the time-tested formula of deterrence through forward deployed military forces in the Western Pacific, strengthening of alliance and security organizations around China and firm economic policies to "manage" China through its awkward adolescent phase as a world power. However, what seems prudent can also heighten tensions between China and America, embolden Chinese nationalist sentiments, and fuel those inside China that feel, yet again, Western interests are attempting to control China, leading to retrenchment among hardliners inside the country.⁶¹ A too-strong military presence will inevitably lead to strong Chinese military posturing, thus beginning the endless action and reaction cycle that fuels arms races, brinksmanship, and possibly conflict. The

seemingly prudent action to manage China could be counterproductive for the strategic aims of both countries.

The United States military is reorienting, or “pivoting” toward Asia. President Obama announced in 2011 that American Marines would begin to train and serve a permanent presence in Australia, in addition to an already significant presence in Japan, Hawaii, and other Pacific locations.⁶² The issue of Taiwan continues to present thorny diplomatic obstacles despite America’s support of the One-China policy. America is now coordinating with our allies, the Philippines, India, Japan, and South Korea, to present a unified face of resolve to the new China.⁶³ What will be China’s response? If the experience with Japan before World War II is a guide, the realists and the nationalists inside China will gain traction. If forward presence and tough economic policy is the appropriate measure for the United States to take, what will be the Chinese counter action? Most likely it will be to push back against the perceived containment from the United States by growing its military and exerting its own strength in an effort to be taken seriously.

A complex and nuanced American foreign policy with China that includes openness and cooperation where possible, but also includes clear “red lines” that should not be crossed is the best policy. Incidents such as the harassment of international shipping in the South China Sea should not be tolerated and this must be made clear to China. The United States should also carefully consider the strength and location of its forces forward deployed. The point where deterrence becomes provocation and provocation becomes military action, leaves otherwise rational countries with few good options.

As the former Director of National Intelligence, Dennis Blair, stated in a speech in 2011, “China must decide if it is going to live in a world system established by the United States and its allies in 1945, or make a new world order in which China makes the rules.”⁶⁴ America, defender of the current world order will defend the status quo. China, the rising power may be determined to change that status quo.

The Lessons of History

Nearly one hundred years ago, a rising Japan challenged Western nations in the Pacific and Asia and reaped a disastrous war that killed millions of people and changed the international status quo. However, the war between Japan and the United States was not inevitable by any means. A series of misunderstandings, misjudgments, and misguided policy led the two countries to this calamity. Strategists and policy makers in the current era should once again study the failed policies of the 1930s in order to inform America’s strategic posture with a growing and powerful China. Several lessons can be gleaned from a study of the Japanese-American conflict.

First, each advisory must make a concerted effort to know the motivation and national interest of the opposing side. In 1941, both Japan and America misunderstood the underlying motivations of the other, so that when war came, it was a surprise to the people of each nation. These deep misunderstandings can be overcome through cooperation on issues of mutual interest that encourages links throughout governmental and private entities that can be leveraged in times of crises. In 1941, racial, cultural, political, and economic divisions were deep. Opportunities exist in the contemporary environment to reduce these preconceived ideas among the people of both nations, but the governments must encourage these mutual exchanges. As noted earlier, provocation is, so to speak, in the eye of the beholder. An insult can be much more

perceived when the provocateur is an unknown foreign entity than when it is a colleague with a rich history of mutual exchange.

A second lesson drawn from this review is that of the importance of clarity in policy between two nations. Both Japan and the United States allowed the other to assume that provocation would be met with demure temerity or even acquiescence. Today, China makes policy in the South China Sea that is belligerent at best without clearly telegraphing its intentions to its neighbors. The United States is equally unclear with its “One-China” policy while simultaneously selling arms to Taiwan. It is these deep misunderstandings that inevitable lead to conflict.

Finally, a lack of control in the actions of subordinates in both Japan and the United States allowed lower ranking officials dictate national policy. The Mukden incident in China led to a Japanese military commitment there, and Dean Acheson’s de facto oil embargo restricted President Roosevelt’s options in 1941 prior to the war. Misunderstandings lead to policies that are unclear which then allows second tier policy-makers to blunder into provocation, which are then perceived as provocations because the opposing nations do not understand the other’s intentions. In the end, the more open the dialogue and exchange of ideas, the less likely a tragic conflict will occur.

Endnotes

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